

1

Defining History

Introduction

At the end of this lesson, you will learn what history is, the importance of learning history and how to understand history which covers a long period of time.

1.1 What is History?

People have been living on this earth for quite a long time. During that time,

- (a) They have lived in different parts of the world.
- (b) They have made their environment conducive for their living.
- (c) They have maintained relationships with each other.

The story that describes these past events is history. In short, history means studying and describing the details of the people who lived in the past.

1.2 How to Study History...

We did not exist thousand years ago. Therefore, we do not have any knowledge of what happened in the past. Pay your attention to what is given below.

- (a) I haven't seen my grandfather's mother.
- (b) I haven't seen how my school was built.
- (c) I do not know about the elders who served our village.

All of those events belong to the history of your life. Then, how do you know about them?

- (a) My father has told me about the mother of my grandfather.
- (b) An article in our school magazine has described how my school was constructed.
- (c) Our principal sir told us about the elders who served our village, in the school assembly.

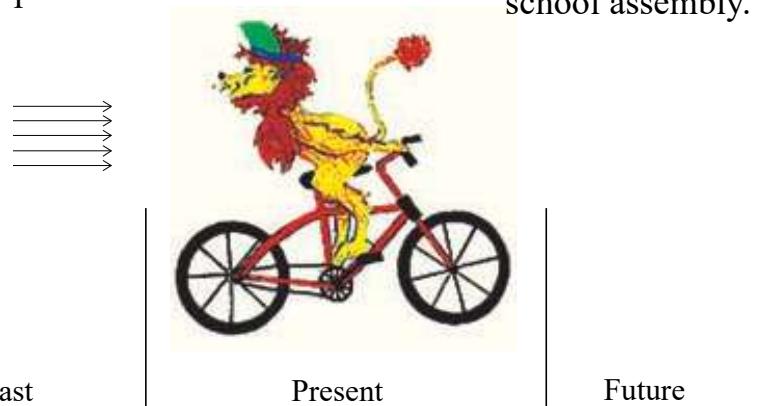


Fig. 1.1. Looking back at the past and learning what has happened belong to studying history.

When you learn history, you may have questions such as these;

- (a) What was the shape of the throne on which our kings had sat?
- (b) What type of currency was used in our country in ancient times?

- ★ Such a throne has been placed in the Colombo National Museum.
- ★ We have seen many old coins kept in the museum.

You can realize what a throne is by seeing it with your own eyes. We are able to get some knowledge about coins by seeing them.

We learn history referring to books written in ancient times; if not, with the help of the remaining articles used by the people who lived in the past. In addition to these two ways, we can learn about history through stories about the past narrated by our elders. There is a common term used to introduce everything which helps us to study history; that is 'a source'.



Fig. 1.2. Many things about history can be learnt from the elders.

There are two types of sources which are useful to study history.

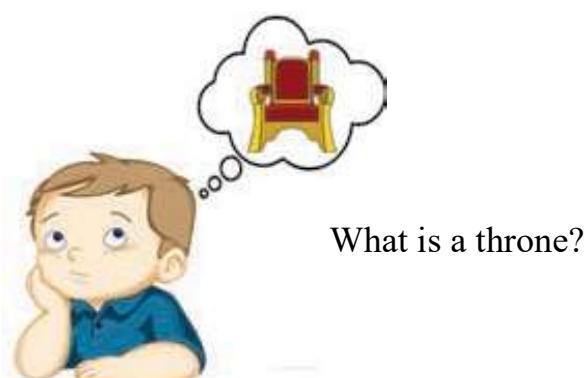
- (a) Literary sources – (ancient written records such as old books and folktales)
- (b) Archaeological sources – (what is remaining now, which belonged to the past, such as old articles, building constructions and their ruins)

Examples:

Human skeletons, various things left after being used by man for his food.

Some sources which are helpful to study the history of Sri Lanka

Source	Type	Time of composition / construction	Author
Deepawamsa	Literary Source	4 th Century AD	Not known
Mahawamsa	Literary Source	5 th Century AD	Mahanama Thero of Diksanda Senewiya Pirivena, which was affiliated to Mahawiharaya
Galvihara in Polonnaruwa	Archaeological Source	12 th Century AD	King Parakramabahu I



What is a throne?



Activity 01

Fill in the grid given below with the names of the types of sources which help you to know the history of your school.



Literary Sources	Archaeological Sources

1.3 Benefits of Learning History

You might think whether there is any use of learning about the things which occurred in the past. Though they belong to the past, we can use the message given by them to make our present better.

Let's try to explain this fact with a simple example. One of the serious problems that we face today is the unfavourable environmental condition caused as a result of utilizing insecticides and chemical manure.

But in the past, Sri Lanka was known as the Granary of the East because of the successful methods practised in agriculture. There is not any evidence which tells us that there existed any environmental pollution that can be seen today.

A means to solve our present problem can be found by understanding how people were engaged in agriculture in an environmental friendly way in the past.

We need to look back at the history to understand how the things that we see and hear at present came into existence. For example, one day you may wonder how the scripts that you write today were formed. Perhaps one of your friends may ask you the same question. To understand the evolution of scripts, its history has to be studied. Writing scripts in Sri Lanka has a history of about 2,250 years. Accordingly, try to understand how the letter 'ක' in Sinhala evolved into the present state as shown in fig. 1.3.

By gaining a good understanding of the successes and failures of our ancestors, we can have a guidance to solve the problems that we face today. Furthermore, the light of that knowledge guides us to have an understanding of how our future should be and how our country can be developed in the future.

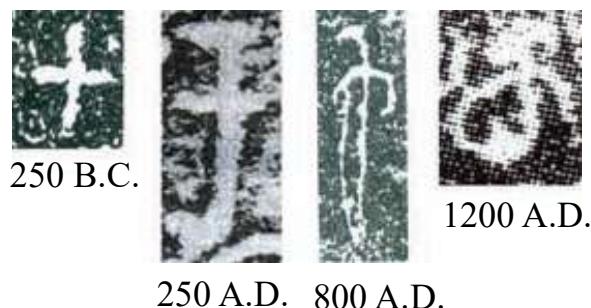


Fig. 1.3 The way how the Sinhala letter 'ක' evolved into its present form.

Activity 02

Write an essay about the "History of Your School".

1.4 How Does History Measure Time?

History means a long period of time. It is important to measure it (time) accurately, when we study history. There are a few methods to measure the time of history in which many events had happened. The two methods used most frequently are;

- 4 (a). Before Christ (B.C.)
- (b). Anno Domini (A.D.)

These two methods are based on the year of birth of Jesus Christ. Accordingly,

The time period before the birth of Jesus Christ is called 'before Christ (B.C.)',

The time period after the birth of Jesus Christ is known as 'Anno Domini (A.D.)'.

Let's get this clarified through an example; Arahat Mahinda Thero arrived in our country 250 years before the birth of Jesus Christ. Hence, it is considered that this event took place in 250 B.C.

King Mahasen who constructed Minneriya tank, started reigning Sri Lanka, 274 years after the birth of Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is considered that his rule started in 274 A.D.

In addition to what has been mentioned above, Buddhist years and Saka years are sometimes used to show the time. These methods had been used in ancient India and Sri Lanka. You may have seen that these two types of methods are mentioned in almanacs in our houses. These two methods are used to calculate historical time on some occasions even today.

Buddhist years start since the day on which the demise (Maha Parinibbana) of the Lord Buddha took place. Although scholars hold different views of the year in which the demise of the Lord Buddha took place, the general belief is that it happened five hundred and forty four years before the birth of Jesus Christ, that was in 544 B.C.

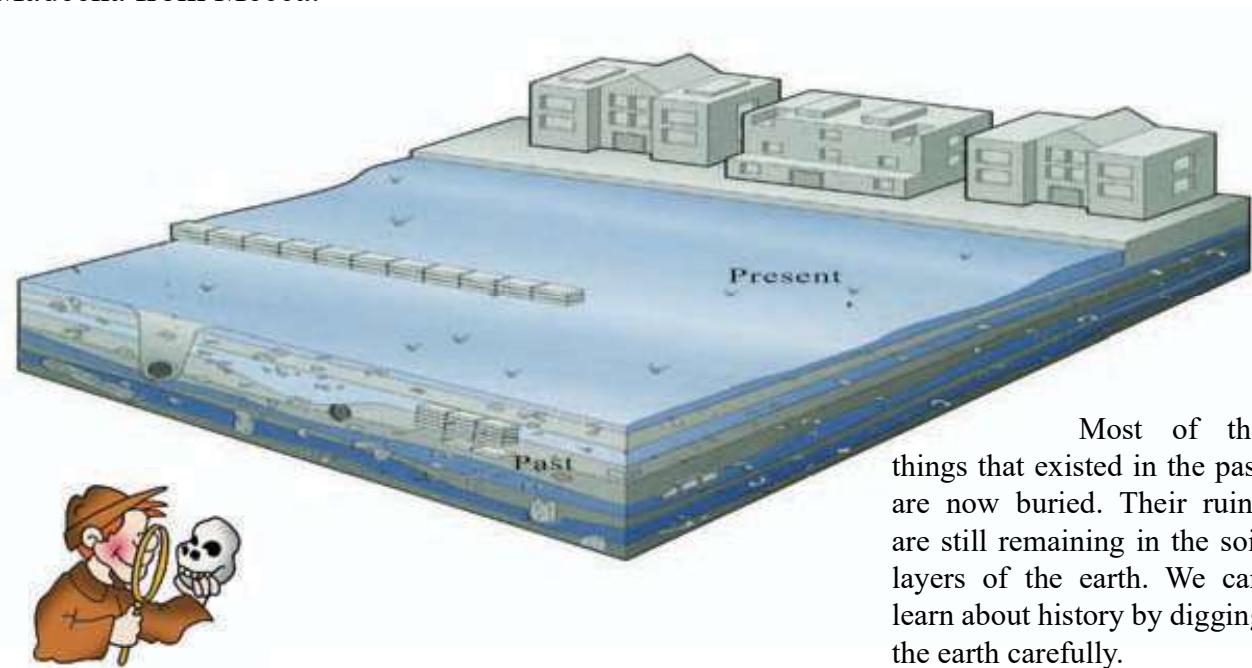
The system of Saka years is a calendar of Hindus. It started in 78 A.D. The king Gauthamiputhra Sathakarni who ruled the Western India started Saka year system in memory of the victory gained over the areas of the Saka people.

There is a chronological method used by Muslims to calculate time in celebrating their religious festivals. It is called Hijri years. It started in 622 A.D. It was the year in which Prophet Mohammad, the leader of the Islam religion, arrived in the city of Madeena from Mecca.

easily, have deposited on these soil layers. More ancient things have deposited on the lowest layer of the soil while things belonging to the recent past are deposited on the higher layers of the soil.

Times in which a few historically important events took place according to the method of A.D. :-

Sri Lanka became an independent country - 1948 A.D.



Most of the things that existed in the past are now buried. Their ruins are still remaining in the soil layers of the earth. We can learn about history by digging the earth carefully.

In addition to these methods, there are a number of methods used in laboratories to calculate the ancient history of some hundred thousand years. Time can be calculated by digging the earth systematically too. This process is known as archaeological excavation. When the earth is excavated, soil layers under the earth could be seen. Various things, which belonged to the past and did not decay

The beginning of King Mahasen's rule – 274 A.D.

The beginning of King Vasabha's rule – 67 A.D.

Birth of Jesus Christ – 1 A.D.

Demise (Maha Parinibbana) of the Lord Buddha – 544 B.C.

Time in which a few historically important events took place according to the method of Buddhist Era :-

The beginning of King Mahasen's rule
– 818 Buddhist Era

The beginning of King Vasabha's rule
– 611 Buddhist Era

Birth (nativity) of Jesus Christ – 544
Buddhist Era

Demise (Maha Parinibbana) of Lord
Buddha – 1 Buddhist Era



Activity 03

Write the events given below in A.D.
and in Buddhist Era.

1. Your birthday
2. Current year

Important Points:

- 1). Everything that man did in the past belongs to the history.
- 2). What helps us to learn history is called a source. They are divided into two types named literary sources and archaeological sources.
- 3). Studying history will lead us to realize what is happening at present and what we should plan to do in the future.
- 4). There are methods to understand the time in which some events took place. The year system based on the birth of Jesus Christ (A.D.) and the year system based on the demise (Maha Parinibbana) of the Lord Buddha (Buddhist Era) are prominent among them.